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ABSTRACT

Most college students are not accustomed to writing about, reading, analyzing, or discussing 19th-century Black literature, especially slave narratives. As many educators try to include more Black literature in their curriculums, there is a growing need to develop successful methods to approach the texts so that students are prepared to write quality papers about Black literature. Some successful techniques for helping students move away from the "lamentations of non-identification" are: (1) remind students, by example, that they do not have to identify with the text to write about it; (2) use a structure moving students from background information about the text to an analysis of writing about the work; (3) incorporate multidimensional techniques to the study of the literature, such as using music; (4) use an interdisciplinary approach to texts; and (5) use a structure of modules for courses, moving students from one theme to another with continuity. (CR)

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Transcending the Lamentations of Non-Identification: Approaches to Teaching Students Ways to Write About 19th Century Black Literature[1]

by Sandra M. Grayson

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The Scene:

Empty handed, Student X entered the room. The most noticeable thing on his face was a pained look. "I'm sorry--I can't write the paper. I'm having problems relating to this text," he said, paused, then sighed. "After all, I was never a Black person in antebellum America," he lamented as he explained what he perceived as an insurmountable barrier between him and a writing assignment about Harriet Jacobs' Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl.

Although this scene was rarely (if ever) performed in my courses when students studied and wrote about "traditional" canonical texts, I often saw repeat performances when we reached the point in the syllabus dealing with nineteenth century slave narratives and novels by Blacks. The fact that most students are not accustomed to writing about, reading, analyzing, nor discussing nineteenth century Black literature probably

[1]I presented this paper at the Conference on College Composition and Communication in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, March 27-30, 1996

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helped create this drama. As many educators try more and more to include Black literature in their curriculums, there is a growing need to develop successful methods to approach the texts so that students are prepared to write quality papers about Black literature. In this paper, I outline techniques that I have had success with to help students move away from what I call the "lamentations of non-identification" and toward a serious study and analysis of nineteenth century Black literature.

I. Before beginning a study of Black literature, I inform the students that they do not have to "identify with" the text to write about it; remind them that they were never 18th century white men, yet they effectively wrote about The Algerine Captive; and advise them that the same depth and skill that they used to study and write about works by such people as Thomas Jefferson and Royall Tyler should be applied to the study of Black literature.

II. I use a structure that moves students from background information about the text (giving them a foundation on which to build) to analysis of then writing about the work.

III. I incorporate multidimensional techniques to the study of the literature. For instance, when dealing with the issue of slave song in slave narratives, I give a lecture about slave music then have the students:

A. volunteer to read and discuss the following excerpts from:

1. Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl:

> The congregation struck up a hymn, and sung as though they were as free as the birds that warbled round us,–
>
> Ole Satan thought he had a mighty aim;
> He missed my soul, and caught my sins.
> Cry Amen, cry Amen, cry Amen to God!
>
> He took my sins upon his back;
> Went muttering and grumbling down to hell.
> Cry Amen, cry Amen, cry Amen to God!
>
> Ole Satan's church is here below.
> Up to God's free church I hope to go.
> Cry Amen, cry Amen, cry Amen to God!

Precious are such moments to the poor slaves. If you were to hear them at such times, you might think they were happy. But can that hour of singing and shouting sustain them through the dreary week, toiling without wages, under constant dread of the lash?[1]

2. Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass:

[Slave songs] told a tale of woe. . .they were tones loud, long, and deep; they breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains. . . .I have often been utterly astonished, since I came to the north, to find persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness. It is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake. Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy. The songs of the slaves represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only

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[1]Harriet, Jacobs. Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Edited by Jean Fagan Yellin. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1987

as an aching heart is relieved by its tears.[3]

3. My Bondage and My Freedom:

A keen observer might have detected in our repeated singing of "Canaan, sweet Canaan, I am bound for the land of Canaan," something more than a hope of reaching heaven. We meant to reach the *north*--and the north was our Canaan

I thought I heard them say,
There were lions in the way,
I don't expect to stay
Much longer here.

Run to Jesus--shun the danger--
I don't expect to stay
Much longer here,"

Was a favorite air, and had a double meaning. In the lips of some, it meant the expectation of a speedy summons to a world of spirits; but, in the lips of *our* company, it simply meant, a speedy pilgrimage toward a free state, and deliverance from all the evils and dangers of slavery.[4]

B. discuss (in small groups) the imagery, symbols, and multiple meanings in three spirituals then make connections back to the passages from the slave narratives.

C. watch a video from the Georgia Sea Islands in which the spirituals are performed. (Thus, the students hear the songs and see people singing--the presentation of the song is also

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[3]Douglass, Frederick. Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass. New York: Doubleday, 1989.

[4]Douglass, Frederick. My Bondage and My Freedom. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1969.

important in terms of adding dimensions to the text.)

D. discuss the three spirituals and the passages in the slave narratives in connection with the performance of the songs in the video.

Hence, the students experience a multidimensional approach, rather than the one dimensional dynamic that occurs from just reading the text.

IV. Since most Black literature incorporates the subject matters of multiple disciplines, I have found that an interdisciplinary approach to the texts that takes into account literature, history, music, and folklore is extremely helpful.

V. I designed a structure of modules for my courses from which the students move from one theme to another as well as through history and literature, giving them continuity. For example, the structure for my American Literature course is a three part format:

A. FREEDOM (religious and political--Puritan texts and Thomas Jefferson's "Declaration of Independence," using Jefferson and race as a transition into the second module);

B. SLAVERY (Algeria and America--Royall Tyler's The Algerine Captive, The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs' Incidents in the Life of a

Slave Girl, and Frances Harper's poems "The Slave Auction" and "The Slave Mother," using Jacobs, Harper, and the issue of the treatment of female slaves as a transition into the last module);

C. GENDER (circling back to Puritan writing with Anne Bradstreet's "The Prologue" then moving to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," Kate Chopin's "The Storm," and Pauline Hopkins' Contending Forces).

These are some of the techniques that I use to help students overcome the "lamentations of non-identification" and write quality papers about Black literature.